

Dilemma in Inclusive Education: How Amre Challenged the Policy of Proportions of Students With and Without Disabilities in an Inclusive Education Center

Kamila Rollan

This case study highlights a teacher's struggle to include a student with autism spectrum disorder into a classroom, where there is already a maximum number of students with special educational needs compliant to the principle of the natural proportions. This study provides a narrative of an ethical dilemma faced in the realization of the educational inclusion of a child with special needs. The case raises the following question: where is the line between adhering to the principles of the natural proportions and excluding a student? This qualitative narrative study facilitates a critical reflection of the dilemma in the inclusive educational leadership, when difficult decisions need to be made.

Keywords: dilemma, principles, the policy of proportion.

Case Study Context

In his book, *Addressing Tensions and Dilemmas in Inclusive Education*, Brahm Norwich (2013) makes the argument that although inclusive education is often portrayed as an exemplary and highly equitable model of education; there are multiple tensions and ethical dilemmas faced in its practical implementation. Exploring and reflecting on such dilemmas reveal the complexities surrounding inclusive education and serve as a teaching material to educational leaders, who aspire to promote this model of schooling. Therefore, this case study follows the logic of Norwich's investigation, and provides a narrative of an ethical dilemma faced in the realization of educational inclusion of a child with special needs. Narrative inquiry in a qualitative research allows the research process to take a form of a lived experience itself (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and justifies an absence of the traditional methodological elements and the focus on the story and the reflection instead.

This case study presents a teacher's personal story about a dilemma faced in her professional experience. The methodology behind this - while being a master's degree student studying in the field of inclusive education, she learned about the multiple barriers and efforts to implement the inclusive model and philosophy of education, and was eager to contribute to the improvement of the current situation. She realized that while necessary reform initiatives were being discussed, developed, and gradually implemented, the actual condition was such that the majority of children with disabilities studied in the specialized segregated institutions or on a home-school basis in Kazakhstan. This realization resulted in a goal to create conditions allowing children with special needs to study in a mainstream educational setting with their peers. Therefore, in October 2017, she opened a private educational center, which adheres to the principles of inclusive education, ensures student diversity and provides the necessary support to those with identified special educational needs (SEN). The center declared its openness to children with intellectual and behavioral difficulties, who had been previously denied the right to study in the mainstream schools. Therefore, many parents of children with special needs began contacting the center; the center's team worked on attracting students from the mainstream schools, who had not been identified any disability to attend the center. Four study groups were launched, each containing students both with and without disabilities.

A policy of the center was connected to the proportion of students with SEN in a classroom. This policy followed the principle of "natural proportions", according to which the representation of students with disabilities in the classroom should broadly reflect the proportion of people with disabilities in the society (Daniels & Garner, 1999; Giangreco et al., 1994). Since due to a lack of clear statistical data on the percentage of people with disabilities in Kazakhstan, and the natural proportion principle cannot be applied accurately, a limit of 20% of children with disabilities per classroom was set. This was necessary because if the proportion of children with disabilities became dominant, the center would have transformed itself into a specialized institution rather than an inclusive one. According to the teacher who opened the center, inclusive education was not about students with a disability, but rather about creating welcoming conditions for participation, achievement, and the well-being of all. Therefore, focusing mostly on students with disabilities to the extent of becoming a special classroom might mean ignoring the needs of those without disabilities, who also had their needs and concerns. This was the justification for the teacher and the center to set a limit to how many students with identified disabilities should be included.

Being located on one university campus, the center became known among the university community members and the staff. A dilemma appeared when one day a staff member of this university, who had a child with autism spectrum disorder, had learned about the center and asked to enroll her son. Amre, as the son henceforth to be referred to, had behavioral concerns that did not allow him to be included into the mainstream school; therefore his mother decided he would benefit from attending the center.

Dilemma Narrative

When Amre's mother arrived to enroll her son, there were only three students in the morning group, one of whom had the autism, another, who was from a low-income family, and a third, who did not have any identified special need. As there was already one child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) among three students, it was believed that they were not able to include more children with disabilities at that point unless more students without identified special needs were attracted to the center. The principle of 20/80 proportion was explained to Amre's mother, and she was suggested to consider enrolling him after more students enter the center. However, the mother reacted harshly; she had heard too many refusals in the past.

The mother explained that Amre has been always denied the right to attend a mainstream kindergarten, and then school, because of his behavioral difficulties. No school could bear with him for more than a month, after which the teachers and the administration used to conclude they could neither educate him, nor allow disrupt the classes. Amre's mother was referred to an inclusive education school, where he was not accepted as well. She then tried several expensive private schools, claiming that she was ready to pay any amount of the fee to get her son placed in a school, however, the private schools rejected her referrals. By the time she came to the center, she had felt already desperate and lonely, and almost started crying, while aggressively pushing the teacher, the director of the center, to enroll Amre. When the mother finished her speech, the center leadership felt confused and puzzled, and began to re-assess the principle of proportion, though both maintaining and forfeiting it carried their own risks.

The risk of accepting Amre was connected to the center's potential transition into a specialized service provider rather than remaining an inclusive center. At that point, there already existed one referral for placement from another parent of a child with special needs, who was told to wait until the center gets more students. This parent agreed with the principle of proportions, and did not further request the enrollment. Accepting Amre would have meant giving up the principle, and entailing the obligation to accept the child referred to previously, and maybe any other who would apply in the future.

On the other hand, the rejection of this referral would have resembled the exclusion, and a disregard of parental efforts to advocate for the inclusion of their child. This decision would be contrary of the center's value system and philosophy, and might also send a negative social message discouraging parents from further efforts to build a supportive community around their children.

Dilemma Outcome

As a result, the decision was made to include Amre into the morning group as an exception from the proportions principle. The teaching team of teachers then continued creating inclusive educational center, setting personal goals, and ensuring Amre had the necessary conditions to feel welcomed and perform well. Still, managing his behavior was problematic, especially during the first two weeks of classes. As a result, a parent of the student, who did not have disabilities, decided to withdraw her child from the courses. She thought having two peers with autism, and one peer from a low-income family in a group of four students, was not favorable for her son. That meant leaving the morning class with three students, all of whom had special educational needs. To some extent, the teacher's fear of her center turning into a specialized one realized.

After two months of such special educational arrangement, the center managed to attract more neurotypical students into their groups, which allowed them to solve the dilemma, and remain committed to the inclusive education model. However, it might have been not in the best interest of children and their families to study in a special class for two months. By being inclusive of children with disabilities without rigid commitment to the principles of proportion, the teacher failed with the promise to facilitate inclusive education. This dilemma strengthened her

position about the number of students with special needs favored in the classroom, but also made her exclusionary, due to a high demand from this group of students. Therefore, she views this dilemma as not being solved on a theoretical level, even though a practical solution was developed eventually. After some time, Amre started showing solid positive results in his academic performance and behavioral patterns.

Teaching Notes

1. This case study presents several lessons about dilemmas in education that refer to the concept called “spontaneous” inclusion, meaning an absence of policies and procedures concerning inclusive education, which often results in the poor implementation of given model and unplanned decisions with relation to educating children (Indenbaum, 2013). This might lead to the ineffectiveness of implementing inclusive education, and further misconceptions that this model is unworkable. Therefore, there is a great importance in setting policies, and firm plans when it comes to this field.
2. This narrative guided by the critical reflection allows concluding that there is a thin line between excluding a student with special needs, and adhering to the principles of the natural proportions. The difference is so small that it might even imply that building an inclusive class in a setting with a limited number of such options requires setting a limit, such as to how many students with special needs should be included. Low supply of inclusive schooling opportunities, and a high demand for them results in setting of the “20/80 proportions principle”.
3. Getting continuous referrals from parents meant that one day the teacher had to say ‘no’ to enrolling one more child with a disability. Therefore, inclusive education and the inclusion of students with disabilities are not the same ideas. It is important to remember that children without disabilities are at the focus of inclusive education as well. The line between inclusion of children with special needs, and favoring them might be thin, which highlights the nature of an ethical dilemma with Amre.

Questions for Discussion

1. It is commonly believed that parental advocacy is central to inclusive education reform. Do you think this case exemplifies effective parental advocacy?
2. What might be the best educational option for Amre? What are the benefits? What are the risks?
3. What might be the best educational option for those students without disabilities who were attending the center at the time when Amre came? What are the benefits? What are the risks?
4. Should an inclusive school reject students with special needs if there are more than 20% (or whatever percentage is identified according to natural proportions policy) of such students already?

Suggested Readings

- Clandinin, J., & Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.
- Daniels, H., & Garner, P. (1999). *Inclusive Education: World Yearbook of Education 1999*. Routledge.
- Giangreco, M. F., Cloninger, C.J., Dennis, R. E., & Edelman, S.W. (1994). Problem-solving methods to facilitate inclusive education. In J.S. Thousand, R.A. Villa, & A.I. Nevin (Eds.), *Creativity and collaborative learning: A practical guide to empowering students and teachers*, 321–346. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Indenbaum, E., L. (2013). *K chemu privodit “stibinaya inkluziya” detei s zaderzhkoi psibicheskogo razvitiya?* [What does “spontaneous inclusion” of children with developmental delay lead to?] *Upbringing and teaching children with developmental disabilities* (4), 32-38.
- Norwich, B. (2013). *Addressing Tensions and Dilemmas in Inclusive Education: Living with uncertainty*. London: Routledge.